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Learning in Collective Impact Processes: Complexity and Change

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Abstract: This study explored the learning among participants in collective impact community efforts to address social issues. Research focused on the process of learning as co-emergence and the ways in which learning affected participants' understandings of root causes of and systems involved in the social issues.

Collective Impact is touted as the cutting-edge approach of collaborative responses to issues such as poverty and lower educational attainment of specific populations. It involves coordination and consensus between nonprofits, for-profits, and government agencies around five organizing principles (Kania & Kramer, 2011).This model holds potential for addressing complex issues which have multiple causes and interactions among many players and processes (Hanleybrown, Kania & Kramer, 2012).The responsiveness of the approach to complex phenomena has been characterized as "emergent" (Kania & Kramer, 2013).

While existing studies of collective impact approaches identify what participants have learned in a technical realm (Nee & Jolin, 2012; Hanleybrown et al., 2012), little research has been conducted about deeper levels of learning and the process of learning. The model clearly requires adaptive learning by participants as they seek consensus on a common agenda and respond to data and program evaluation results. Understanding learning in this type of evolving process strengthens the research base and theorizing in the field of adult education.

An additional gap in the literature is research that describes learning as a process of co-emergence, or interaction between the learner and his/her environment. One dissertation uses the framework to study learning among nonprofit leaders (Seymour, 2012). Davis and Sumara (2006) have developed descriptions of "enactivist" learning among K-12 teachers and descriptions of learning as occurring simultaneously at multiple levels. Fenwick (2003) has explored how the insights of complexity thinking can expand our understanding of experiential learning in ways that "re-embody" the learning process. This research project adds an additional empirical study to this small body of literature.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is rooted in complexity thinking, an approach to understanding learning that recognizes learning as an emergent and embodied process. This learning happens through a process of coemergence, as the learner adapts in response to changes in the environment, and the environment adapts to the actions taken by the learner or learners in that environment. Learning is also understood to be happening simultaneously at multiple levels (bodily subsystems, individual, collective, culture, and society) (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2008).

Critical pragmatic theory (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995) is the second framework which undergirds this study, as we seek to understand how the process of collective impact approaches might address root causes of social and economic inequities and lead to more just and sustainable ways to ensure the full development of individual and collective potential. Initial evaluation of one collective impact effort demonstrated its effectiveness in achieving specific program

objectives (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). However, the projects conducted so far are recent and little research has been conducted on the projects' effectiveness at addressing underlying structural issues that are causes of inequity.

Research Design

This study seeks to fill the gaps in the literature with research on the learning among participants in three collective impact processes. One of the collaborations is neighborhood-based, the second is sectoral, focusing on improving the situation of refugee youth. The third collaboration is a regionally-based, sectoral approach, focused on improving attendance rates in higher education institutions, especially among traditionally underrepresented populations.

Qualitative interviewing and ethnographic observation were the primary data collection methods. These methods were chosen because of their effectiveness in generating data that enable the researchers to develop rich descriptions of the learning processes among participants.

Sixty minute interviews were conducted with participants in each process: two interviews with program coordinators and two with program directors from United Way, a back bone organization; two with staff from partner nonprofit agencies; and one with a leader of the Utah System of Higher Education, a second backbone organization.

In addition, one of the authors of the study carried out ethnographic observations and compiled field notes of the meetings she attends regularly for the neighborhood-based process.

The questions guiding the research process were:

1) What have participants in the collective impact process learned through their participation in the process?
2) How has the interaction of the participant with other people in the backbone organization, with other people in the collective impact process such as neighborhood or sectoral organizations, and with the larger societal context affected the learning process?
3) Has participation in the process changed the participants' understandings of root causes of the issue they are addressing, and if so, in what ways have they changed?

Data was analyzed following the critical ethnography approach outlined by Carspecken (1996) and the integration of complexity thinking into educational research as defined by Davis and Sumara (2006) and Davis (2008). The goal was to generate thick description of the participants' learning and situate that learning within the dynamics of the collective impact process so that the description includes the interactive dynamics of the participants' learning. Additional analysis extended the understanding of learning as it is affected by larger societal contexts (Carspecken, 1996). Triangulation of data sources, member checks, and insights from two critical friends strengthened the data analysis process.

Findings and Discussion

What Participants Learned Through the Process

Participants in the study learned at different levels. At the bodily subsystems level, staff people experienced a variety of emotions which shaped their actions. At the individual level, learning was primarily around implementation procedures. At the group level amongst the United Way staff, another form of learning was the development of a group identity. At the inter-organizational level, a new way of "doing business" through collaboration was learned by some of the organizations. Participants hold out the hope that the next level up, of funders, will learn new ways to fund philanthropic efforts using the collective impact model.

Participants reported experiencing emotions including exhilaration, frustration, anxiety about uncertainties, and excitement. These emotions undergirded their actions and served to motivate and to decrease energies. One participant described the process "So it's exciting, and it's exhausting, it's kind of an emotional rollercoaster."

At the individual level, participants reported learning mostly about the process of implementing a collective impact approach, especially in the context of the United Way taking on the role of "self-imposed backbone organization." Participants described learning tools and processes for conducting meetings and working toward the development of a shared agenda and common measurements (the starting points of a collective impact approach). They learned more about the settings in which they were working (e.g., K-12 schools, refugee youth programs), who were the important players to invite to the table, and how to present the collective impact process. One reported, "I've learned that while the principles are simple, the work itself is very, very complicated the more you discover it. And it's easy to get lost in the work if you don't hold true to the principles."

At the level of the United Way staff, the participants developed a shared identity as "the ones who get it," the "coalition of the willing," and as pioneers. A characteristic of complex adaptive systems is that they self-organize, often around a shared identification, which can be a belief, a consolidating event, or an enemy (Davis & Sumara, 2006). In this case, United Way chose to become the backbone organization and restructured its relationships with partner organizations. The staff people hired for the new positions have developed a strong sense of unity and coherence in their efforts, using exactly the same phrasings when describing their efforts. Staff from partner organizations shared that discourse to a great extent, reflecting the boundaries and collective identity they have all defined.

As inter-organizational groups, there was also learning at the group level around collective impact as "a new way of doing business." One staff person described the shift, "And I think a strength of collective impact is asking people and then supporting them in kind of either adjusting, changing, or just setting aside their own missions for one purpose. And I think that's a huge strength, because it's hard to get non-profits or anyone to do something different than the way they've always done it."

> A participant involved with the refugee youth described that group's learning this way, There was a meeting outside of the refugee crew with several of the same agencies…and there was a funding opportunity to set up some program where all three of the agencies would be administering it. And what I saw happen was there was more collaboration—real collaboration at the table that was very similar to what we had been practicing in Collective Youth. So I think we all must have learned something because at the table we found ourselves, rather than agencies positioning themselves maybe taking the most resources, there was actually a pretty genuine discussion about what the community needed and how we could all best align our services…So to me that's kind of the example that we had learned a different way of doing business...

At the next level up, the actions of the working groups and the United Way leadership are influencing the larger nonprofit and philanthropic communities and bringing about learning at this subcultural level. This shift is reflected in many other nonprofits "getting on board" or at least using collective impact terminology to describe what they are doing or aspire to do. One of the staff people described the process she sees happening,

> And it [the collective impact model] is working, and it will take some time to really… like years, to really show that it is working, but as it works, it's going to change not only the way that organizations work together, but I believe the way that foundations give money. It's going to change the way that people think about all kinds of things…the potential is also there to really reform systems indirectly. Just because the outcomes will speak for themselves, and funders will begin to look around and say "Hold on a second, we're seeing more of what we want to see in the communities where we serve through this type of conversation than we were before. Maybe we need to give differently."

How Interactions Affected the Learning Process

The interactive aspects of learning were a crucial part of the learning process described by all participants. The complexity lens enables us to see how the levels of learning were happening simultaneously and how learning at each level was both constrained and enabled by the interactions with the larger context.

While all participants were able to point to some readings, conferences, or workshops that had helped them learn about collective impact, they all said the most significant part of their learning was in their interactions with others, primarily in meetings. This included staff meetings and informal conversations among staff of the backbone organization (for the United Way staff) and various types of meetings with community partners. One said, "I don't know, but really a lot of it you just have to start doing. That's the hardest part. You just have to jump in and swim a little. There's really no other way to prepare yourself than just jump in and do it (*laughs*)."

All participants were appreciative of the opportunity to learn with colleagues in this difficult process. Another said,

> I think that the process for learning collective impact work is better sustained when you're not the one person doing it. So when you have a team of people that believes in the principles, and are also trying to figure it out with you, then the learning… I think learning can take place better that way.

Another participant pointed to the emergent nature of the process, in which no one could predict how the interactions with others would turn out.

> So, it's exciting, and it's exhausting, and it makes me feel like I am a constant learner. Like, I will never (*pause*). This isn't something that I can master. It just isn't, and that's both exciting and exhausting to think about. There will always be something new, there will always be something that requires a lot of mental energy to figure out. There will always be working with people, which is a hit-and-miss. One day could be great, and the next you're like "I thought we had this figured out" and it's not. So you just work through that. And you're working with so many people that you have to just realize that there's only so much that you can do, and the rest is their leap of faith; they have their own process. You can't control people's internal process, and sometimes it's easy to get into this state of trying to control things, or set an agenda to lead people's minds in a certain way, and you can't. And so you do the best that you can, and then it's kind of just a big experiment, "Let's see how this meeting goes, and let's see who surfaces as willing, let's see who challenges what, let's just see," and accepting that. And so, that's been kind of a personal thing like "Well, I'm not a control freak, but I feel like I've got to anticipate" but being able to kind of let things go in that anticipation, preparing and saying "All right. Here comes another exciting leap of who-knows-what's-gonna-happen."

As an interactive process, the learning of the participants was bounded by the organizational context of the United Way and its role as backbone organization. While

understanding the importance of collaboration, staff people found it very difficult to achieve ideal collaboration for several reasons including a lack of patience for the process, an inability to get the right people to the table, and disagreement over key pieces of the collaborative effort. The task of getting different organizations and agencies working together, sometimes for the first time, proved frustrating. Participants were also bounded by their own organizations' existing programs and the need to run existing programs while negotiating new collaborative efforts.

At a larger level, learning was bounded by the funding organizations and the requirements they placed on the actions of the nonprofits. The range of possible actions was also bounded by larger economic and political systems, which United Way staff sees as beyond the mission of the institution to address. Examples of these include prevailing wages, health care access, definitions of academic success tied to standardized test scores, etc. The concept of nested levels helps us to see this embeddedness of the different levels of learners and how their learning was enabled and constrained by their position within the nested levels of context.

Learning about Root Causes

The third research question inquired about changes in participants' understandings of root causes through the process. The data showed little change in such understandings, which could be due to a number of factors. One is the short time frame of this collective impact work (less than two years) and the even shorter involvement of some of the participants. Another factor is that the process to date has focused so heavily on setting up the collaborations and partnerships that there has not been much time for discussion of root causes and how collaborations that are working smoothly might begin to address the systems level.

Most of those interviewed came into the work with systems perspectives of root causes, so their work in the collective impact processes has helped them deepen their understanding without necessarily changing that understanding of root causes. Because the process is so new, they are still trying to figure out how to move their collective efforts to the system level.

This research question arose from our critical perspective, our past research efforts, and writings of others questioning the lack of systems level work and the exclusion of those served from nonprofit and governmental program decision-making (Ogden, 2012; Thompson, 2014).

> I was left with the distinct impression that the field—and funders—are much more comfortable talking about great programs that serve 100 or even 1,000 kids, than they are the very long, tedious slog to improve systems-level performance (or, more ambitiously, alignment between different systems). At best, it seems like people strongly believe that better programs will lead to better systems, but we have not clearly articulated how one leads to the other—generally or specifically. (Thompson, 2014)

Kushner theorizes that collective impact holds potential for radical or paradigmatic community change only if four dynamics are at play:

- Voices of those the programming seeks to serve are at the table as co-authors
- An intentionally educative function focuses on helping all collaborators understand root causes at a structural level, especially when privileged membership dominates
- The power dynamics of participating organizations and people are attended to
- There is a shared understanding of the complex constructs of "Collective action/work" and "learning" and a shared commitment to risk-taking.

Without these dynamics in play, the process may be approached in a superficial way (e.g. technical/instrumental responses) which result in a façade of collaboration with nothing on the line; nothing "given up." (J. Kushner, personal communication, February 18, 2014)

More research will have to be conducted, including more interviews with those from partner organizations, to explore the level of systems learning in greater depth.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The description of learning through the collective impact process generated by this research study is valuable in developing a theoretical framework for learning in collective impact. This study provides a clearer description of the learning process participants engaged in, it enables us to see learning happening simultaneously at multiple levels, and shows the interactive processes of the learning. These findings will help us build a theory that explains the learning in collective impact more effectively.

The findings about what participants learned during their participation in the collective impact process are valuable for practice because they can serve as a guide for others undertaking this approach. One process described in this study was unique in that the backbone organization made a shift from its earlier funding role and became the "self-imposed backbone organization." This has not been attempted in other sites and is being watched carefully by other agencies in the country who might attempt something similar. The study also documents the tremendous amount of learning and the processes of learning. Others considering implementing this approach will have a clearer picture of what to expect if they undertake such an approach and how to prepare staff members for this co-emergent learning process.

This study also raises questions for further research. Can collective impact processes lead to greater collaborations addressing systems-level root causes and if so, how might this happen?

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